

Literature, History and Literary History: Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century in Australia

To trace the growth of letters in the community, from the earliest period of our history to the present time, and to show in what manner that growth had been influenced by the productions of the Mother Country ... would amount to a literary history of the country, and it was hoped that such a history would serve more than one useful service. It would enable the reader to form an exact idea of the progress, extent and prospects of literary enterprise among us, more readily than could be done by means of any general statement; it would constitute a bibliographical account that might be practically useful, not only to those who are interested in our literature, but also to those who may hereafter be engaged in historical enquiries; it would serve to throw some light, from a new point of view, on our social history; and lastly, it would preserve the memory, and give some notion of the achievement, of men whose name could scarcely be expected to survive their generation.

So wrote G. B. Barton, Reader in English at the University of Sydney, in the introduction to his *Literature in New South Wales* (1866). This and his critical anthology, *The Poets and Prose Writers of New South Wales* (also 1866), were the first books on Australian literature. Although Barton recorded much valuable bibliographical information, he did not provide any systematic review along the lines he suggests in the above passage; however, his ideal of what literary history ought to provide comprehends the intentions of many who were to follow him with their accounts of the 'growth of letters' in this country.

Barton's intention of enabling the reader to form an opinion of the 'progress' of literature in this country reminds us that he was writing in the mid-Victorian period—and three years after the first appearance

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of Taine's *History of English Literature*. 'Progress' in accordance with the universal laws of evolution was assumed by most nineteenth-century (and perhaps later) commentators on Australian literature. As a new society, a new race, evolved in response to the new environment, so would a new literature, which (ambiguously) would be an agent in and a product of this evolution.¹ And 'prospects' had a particular poignancy for the scholar turning his attention to the literature of his own colony; what he surveyed could be only the first fruits plucked from a vine that had scarce taken root in this thin soil; it would be a later age that reaped the harvest. Later literary historians have traced the extent of the Mother Country's influence on local writing, and of Europe's and America's. Bibliographies have been compiled, and the memories of men whose names could scarcely be expected to survive their generation have been preserved. Here, I want to consider the success with which Barton's other, and elusive, aim—that of throwing some light 'from a new point of view' on our social history—has been fulfilled.

Broadly, one can imagine a literary 'history' that has no awareness of social history at all. The various 'Histories of English Literature' written for schools and civil service examinations in England last century approach this extreme, being chronological listings of authors and descriptions of their works, located in time by reference to ruling monarchs or wars. Then there is the 'social history' of literature itself: literary movements, literary influences, even the lives of writers do not always correspond with the periods postulated on economic or other grounds. But at the point that even the most ahistorical of literary historians move beyond texts and chronology to considerations of conditions of authorship, the writer's expression of social values, or other relationships between the writer, his work, and his society, they are encountering history and, consciously or otherwise, offering an interpretation of the past and of the nature of these cultural relationships. At the opposite extreme from the literary chronicle would be a work—such as Taine's—highly aware of literature as a social institution. In Australia, although there were no attempts to provide inclusive literary histories between Barton's books and H. M. Green's *Outline of Australian Literature* in 1930, many of the problems, assumptions

1 See Brian Kiernan, *Criticism, Australian Writers and Their Work* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1974), pp.8–12.

and issues of Australian literary history had emerged by then.

The first of these problems was that of defining the field—what is *Australian* literature? ('What is *Australian literature*?' and the issue of whether historians should confine themselves to an Arnoldian notion of literature or adopt an anthropological approach to literary culture did not, for obvious reasons, preoccupy a pioneer like Barton.) Although we most usually think of the concept of a national literature emerging in the eighties and nineties of last century, it is a concept that was present almost from the beginning of the century in literary expectations—expectations because these all but preceded the literature. Romantic literary theory in England and on the Continent had seen literature as the history of the national mind and as the expression of the genius of the individual race. The peculiar problems of a country sharing the language and cultural heritage of the English but encountering and mastering a different environment, and developing a new culture, had been experienced in America. There the issue of a national literature—the issue, simply of whether a writer's obligations were to be American or a writer first of all—remained contentious at least until the Civil War; and the contention was not diminished by English observers such as Sidney Smith enquiring in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1820: 'Who in the four quarters of the globe reads an American book?' William Ellery Channing, who felt that it were 'better to have no literature than form ourselves unresistingly on a foreign one' addressed the issue in 1830 in his lecture *The Importance and Means of a National Literature*. In this he defined literature as 'the expression of a nation's mind' and claimed that 'literature is plainly among powerful methods of exalting the character of a nation, of forming a better race of men'.

Such exalted views of literature's function were quite orthodox on both sides of the Atlantic—and soon after on the other side of Pacific. For as George Nadel documents in *Australia's Colonial Culture*, these were also the principles of those who took upon themselves the education and moral improvement of the Australian colonies. Literature and culture were virtually co-extensive terms, and the propagation of literature was expected to alleviate the depressingly materialistic tone of the Australian colonies, restore a lost sense of community, and morally elevate the masses. Nadel shows how, from the 1830s onwards, literary culture was related to nationalism: 'In whatever fashion the argument was disseminated the basic point seemed to be that sheep and acres

did not give a country nationality, but that literature did: indeed there could be no patriotism without literature' and he quotes the essay 'Literature—Its Advancement and Results' from the first issue of the *Australian Era* (1850). The author of the essay saw Australia 'standing on the brink of nationality ... Literature created nationality, because nationality presupposed national thought and a national intelligence, themselves the product of literature'.²

The connection between literature and nationality came early—we might say it was imported before much imaginative writing had appeared in Australia. One of the first (of many, as it turned out) to proclaim the emergence of a national literature was William Walker in his lecture 'Australian Literature' delivered at the Windsor School of Arts in 1864. His historical survey, he felt, showed that Australia had 'a literature of her own of a progressive and promising character', and one, his title implied, that transcended colonial borders and jealousies. So impressed was Walker with the progress already made that he felt another lecture would be necessary to do full justice to the poetry, and that there was every probability that Australia would produce writers worthy to be placed alongside Bacon, Shakespeare, Byron, and Scott. Such optimism reminds one of Melville's in America earlier—'Believe me, my friends, men not very inferior to Shakespeare are being born this day on the banks of the Ohio'³—and the American parallel was one that occurred naturally to critics as Australia enjoyed its own debate over a national literature in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While 'universalists' agonised over whether one could meaningfully speak of American literature (if a work were good enough it surely belonged to English literature?), the 'nationalists' were inspired with confidence, as were the republicans in politics, by the American precedent. The confident national literature they saw as emerging with Hawthorne, Longfellow, Bret Harte, and others seemed an important indication of the most likely course of Australia's own literary maturation. The invariable analogies between literary and biological or organic growth (mothers and daughters, trees and branches, with America always at a

2 George Nadel, *Australia's Colonial Culture: Ideas, Men and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p.69.

3 Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', *Literary World* [New York], August 17 and 14, 1850.

later stage of development) fitted the general belief in the inevitability of evolutionary progress and must have seemed, subconsciously, to guarantee eventual social and literary maturation. The American parallel provided the historical model which was to be employed by later historians of Australian literature. After a colonial period in which immigrant writers discovered a strange new land, native-born writers would emerge to express their acceptance of this land and society as their own; eventually, after a period of nationalistic self-consciousness, a mature, assured, unselfconsciously national literature would be established. Consistently, from about 1870 onwards (and well into the twentieth century) Australian critics were proclaiming the beginning of this second stage, the emergence of distinctively Australian writers; just as in the twentieth century they have proclaimed the achievement of the final stage, the coming of age.

Although there could be no full-scale histories of Australian literature written in the nineteenth century, critical discussions in books and periodicals presupposed views of the development of Australia and literature's relationship to this. Australia had done well for a pioneering country with a small population which, of necessity, had to get on with more immediate matters than pursuing culture; on the other hand, Australia was too materialistic (a view that Barton questioned) and its prosperous class that could afford time and money for culture was too philistine, too nouveau-riche to offer the traditional patronage of the European aristocracy and haute-bourgeoisie. Whichever way the argument ran, this sense of literature as an index of cultural attainment and social history was common to a number of books that appeared around the turn of the century. These were not literary histories in the sense that they pretended to any systematic inclusiveness, but their assumptions concerning the relationships between literature and the society in which it was produced, like those in many other studies of particular writers or partial views of Australian writing in the periodicals, contributed to an awareness of literature as part of our general or cultural history. Indeed, the most frequent assumptions, issues, and phrases, of later literary history can be found in these books which appeared within a brief space of time at the end of last century: Patchett Martin's *The Beginnings of Australian Literature* (1898), a pamphlet originally delivered in London as a lecture by a former editor of the *Melbourne Review*; Desmond Byrne's *Australian Writers* (1896), a collection of

biographical and critical discussions of Clarke, Kingsley, Cambridge, Gordon, Boldrewood, Praed and 'Tasma' introduced by a general discussion; and Turner and Sutherland's *The Development of Australian Literature* (1898), the only one to be published in Australia with primarily an Australian audience in mind.

Turner's introductory 'General Sketch of Australian Literature', (which is then followed by Sutherland's biographies of Clarke, Gordon, and Kendall) expresses the conventional literary historical assumptions about the relationship between the size of the population, the country's stage of development, and its literature. Turner, writing at a time when the population was four million, says that the growth of a large population sharing local experience 'must inevitably bring strength and maturity to a national literature'. The present stage in cultural development Turner sees as restricted by the necessity for culture to take a second place in a pioneering community and the lack of national feeling. Until leisure is possible and a national spirit is developed ('as it will be unless the tradition of our race suffers decay') we must be content 'with the productions of local literature, essentially English in its characteristics, but moulded by climatic and scenic surroundings into a form that gives it sufficient distinctiveness to justify the term "Australian".'

Scepticism towards this attitude that linked the 'development' of Australian literature with the expansion of society, and its corollary that what literature had been produced was admirable for a society at such an early stage of its development, was also expressed. Professor T. G. Tucker, an editor of the *Australasian Critic*, constantly attacked this attitude, as also did Byrne in his introduction to *Australian Writers*. Taking up the parallel with America which had been used so often to prophesy the inevitable emergence of an Australian literature, Byrne inverts it to question its assumptions (Benjamin Franklin, he points out, appeared considerably before America achieved nationhood) and to shatter any complacency about Australian cultural life. Australians, he says, take no pride in creative intellectual work; despite Government provision of education and cultural establishments public taste has not improved; clubs and societies devoted to literature are elitist; the lack of support for local periodicals and books, because of public preference for what is approved by the English public, has meant that it is impossible to live by writing in Australia. These facts, Byrne

suggests: 'may not be found to explain why there is yet no sign of the coming of an Antipodean Franklin or Irving, or Hawthorne or Emerson; but they will help to show why the literature of the country grows so unevenly, why it is chiefly of the objective order and leaves large tracks of the lives of the people untouched.'

In later literary historical accounts, the years in which these views of the relationships between society and culture in Australia were being advanced were also the years when a national feeling (and a politically unified nation) was emerging, and finding expression, particularly in the *Sydney Bulletin*. Byrne, writing in England, seemed unaware of the *Bulletin* writers; the others however were not, though their contemporary view was not that of later generations. Turner's conservatism made him critical of Lawson's radicalism and wary of exaggerating the place of the *Bulletin* writers; Patchett Martin was more warmly disposed towards them as indicating the commencement of an Australian school of writing; Francis Adams employed by the *Bulletin* in the late eighties was contemptuous of local poetry and prose. It would be interesting to establish when the view of the *Bulletin's* central role in the development of a national literature—a view shared by many of its writers and, presumably, readers also—became a historical view. Nettie Palmer's *Modern Australian Literature* (1924) would seem to have been very influential here.

As its title suggests, it is concerned with the first quarter of the twentieth century, and its necessarily summary treatment of the previous century became orthodox in many later accounts. Nettie Palmer was among the first to take a historical view of the decades before and after Federation and to draw a sharp division between the 'colonial' literature which presented Australia through the eyes of expatriate Englishmen (or 'bias-bleared spectacles' as A. G. Stephens had expressed it characteristically in 1901) and the 'Australian' literature that had emerged with the new nation. Of course writers involved in the conscious movement to establish a national literature—Stephens, Lawson, Vance Palmer—felt that the *Bulletin* schools had achieved those long anticipated characteristics by which the national literature would be recognised: a lack of self-consciousness in the use of Australian experience and the assumption of a local rather than an English audience. As Jose wrote in his *History of Australasia* in 1909: 'during the last twenty years there has sprung up a school of young Australians who tell of their own life in

their own natural way, and describe their own country as men who love it; so that through them a stranger can get at the heart of the people, not merely at the ideas about the people formed by interested outsiders.'⁴ *Modern Australian Literature* endorsed such contemporary views as historically accurate. The long-awaited nationhood and national literature had been achieved. For the literary historian the task was to reveal what was essentially Australian in the literature, and the elusive relationships between the land, the people, and the literature that for a long time it had been presupposed would emerge.

Although literary historical issues had been discussed for the best part of a century, it was not until 1930 that the first attempt to provide a comprehensive account of imaginative writing appeared with H. M. Green's *An Outline of Australian Literature*. It was presented, in its introduction, as preliminary to 'a short history of Australian literature' in which an attempt would be made 'to relate the literature of each period to its social, political and other conditions'. As we now know, it was to be another thirty years before that work, which attempted the higher literary historical aim of exploring the relationships between literature and society, appeared. The earlier *Outline*, however, is conceptually unadventurous. It is a 'pure' literary history, and a history of 'pure' literature, which makes only passing references to historical events and developments and is concerned only with 'high' literary culture. The interpretative framework remains vague and general, and its opening sentence retains the favourite metaphor and the guarded stance of the 'colonial' critic: 'Australian literature is a branch of English literature, and however great it may become and whatever characteristics it may develop, it will remain a branch.' For Green, as for so many of the nineteenth century critics, 'the literature of a country is obviously an expression of the characteristic qualities of its life', and he lists the characteristics he discerns:

Most apparent are the qualities, positive and negative, which one would expect to find in the literary work of any young and comparatively undeveloped country, such as vigour and freshness, crudity and lack of architecture and craftsmanship generally; these

4 A. W. Jose, *History of Australasia* (third edition, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1909), p.236.

last, however, no longer mark the best Australian work. But there is also apparent at times a richness, an almost tropical warmth and colouring which may be noticed particularly in the verse of Hugh McCrae and Dorothea Mackellar. More widely spread are certain other qualities which are only in part literary, since their presence in any work which involves representation of character will be derived from the characters represented as well as from the temperament and experience of the writer and their result upon his literary method and point of view. These qualities are an independence of spirit, a kind of humorous disillusion, a careless willingness to take a risk, a slightly sardonic good nature and a certain underlying hardness of texture.⁵

The first two sets of characteristics are conventionally evolutionist and synthesise much nineteenth century discussion which emphasised the difficulties encountered by a pioneering society, and which speculated that climatic and other environmental factors would mould the people and their culture. The third set relates to national character and its expression through literature, and although Green does not develop these here it is these characteristics and their relationship to historical experience and social institutions, including literature, that were to become so important in later accounts, including his own.

In the same year as the *Outline* another book appeared which was to affect views of Australian social history, culture, and literary history for generations to come—W. K. Hancock's *Australia*. Like Tocqueville, who 'tried to explain to cultivated Europeans the characteristics of democracy in a "new" country', Hancock tried to explain to cultivated Europeans the paradoxes of Australian life. His success can be gauged from the fact that *Australia* has assumed something of the same classic status for historians and commentators on society here as *Democracy in America* has in that country. Although not a history, being as much concerned with what could be considered separately as politics, economics, culture, or sociology (for each of which areas it contributed concepts), it was the first study to seek 'dominant themes' in Australian life that would relate the past to the present. It provided an interpretative

5 H. M. Green, *An Outline of Australian Literature* (Whitcombe and Tombs, Sydney, 1930), pp.14–15.

framework that related the social, economic, and cultural in bold hypotheses which many later scholars have examined. For example, the statement that 'Australian nationalism took definite form in the class struggle between the landless majority and the land monopolising squatters', although it synthesises attitudes that had been expressed many times at various stages in the past, confers a historical validation upon them, and anticipates the major theme of Australian historians in later decades.⁶

Hancock's influence on historians and social commentators has been discussed and criticised by R. W. Connell:⁷ here I want only to draw attention to its similar influence on the concept of history found in the work of literary critics. Again as an example of the bold generalisation that anticipates or stimulated later writers we could take his statement that 'Recurrent in Australian poetry is a note of renunciation, sometimes regretful, sometimes defiant ... and a note of expectation, of waiting upon the future for an Australia which has not been known to the past ...'⁸ which accords with Judith Wright's later study of the preoccupations with exile and utopia in Australian poetry.⁹

Hancock sees literature as part of the total cultural development he traces and analyses, and sees it as expressing 'the prevailing ideology of Australian democracy': 'in Lawson and Collins [Furphy], and almost every other writer of the *Bulletin* school, Australian nationalism expressed itself as a repudiation of English conventions and standards, as a vindication of equality and democracy and an assertion of the supreme worth of the average man.'¹⁰ Hancock is synthesising the nationalism and egalitarian democracy that were expressed (however more complexly) by these writers. But he is also defining in social and political terms what was 'characteristic' of Australian literature and providing the literary historian with the link between literature and society in terms of the values expressed in the literature of the nationalist period. These were not the links perceived, or so explicitly formulated, by literary historians (for example, Nettie Palmer or H. M. Green) up to

6 W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (1930; Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961), p.44.

7 R. W. Connell, *Quadrant* 12, 2 (1968), 9-19.

8 Hancock, p.43.

9 Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1965).

10 Hancock, p.257.

this time. However, the tradition Hancock postulated was to be elaborated by historians and critics from then on. It provided the opportunity to interpret the development of literature in terms of social history and to use literature to illustrate the formation of an egalitarian national culture and character. By the time H. M. Green's full history appeared this had become an orthodoxy—though already an orthodoxy under attack—which provided in numerous summaries a stereotyped view of literature developing in accordance with national consciousness. It is also an orthodoxy that clearly affects Green's consideration of the relationship of 'the literature of each period to its social, political and other conditions'.

His *History of Australian Literature* (1961) opens with much more confidence in its subject as an entity than does his *Outline* with its branch-of-the-tree image: 'It is scarcely necessary to argue nowadays that the literature of Australia is worth discussing on its own account, and not merely as part of the great literature in English, of which it is an outgrowth. This great literature is like a banyan-tree, whose branches bend down, and, striking the ground, take root and grow up as independent individuals.'¹¹ And the *History* reflects the growth of interest in, and re-interpretation of, the nineteenth century that had developed since 1930. Green in his concluding section mentions key contributors to this greater awareness of the past, as much historical and broadly cultural as specifically literary: Russel Ward, A. A. Phillips, Cecil Hadgraft, whose own history of Australian literature had appeared in 1960, Vincent Buckley, and others. A. A. Phillips in *Meanjin* (in essays later collected in *The Australian Tradition*) and other contributors to that journal including Manning Clark had elaborated the connections between literature and society Hancock had discerned. Vance Palmer, whose first essay on an Australian national literature had appeared in 1905, and Russel Ward had both explored the social historical bases of the 'legend' that linked the past to the present in a national consciousness. And in the criticism of Buckley and others a reaction against the democratic nationalist interpretation of literature and social history had emerged, so that Green in introducing his discussion of the period 'Self-Conscious Nationalism' could observe 'a tendency nowadays to underrate the

11 H. M. Green, *A History of Australian Literature: Pure and Applied*, two vols (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961), p.xi. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

achievement of the third Period of Australian literature’.

In the *History* Green’s sympathies are on the side of those who had expounded an Australian social and literary tradition. He confesses, in a footnote, of having made the mistake in his *Outline* of ‘concentrating too much upon literature in its more aesthetic aspect’. This ‘aesthetic’ writing in earlier periods was thin and nostalgic in comparison with the ‘rough spun’ indigenous material: ‘beyond the world of books ... material was accumulating that was to form the basis of important elements in the literature to be ... yarns and anecdotes ... old bush songs ... sketches ... recollections, diaries, memoirs ...’ (pp.8–9). Following Russel Ward and other historians, Green perceives in the popular culture of the earlier nineteenth century the bases of an Australian tradition. In dealing with the nineties, his analysis seems to owe more to Hancock and his influence than to what had already been written in the *Outline*: ‘In Australia, the spirit of the nineties and early nineteen-hundreds was a spirit ... which took the form in literary as well as in the social and political worlds, of a fervent democratic nationalism: it was based upon a broad social consciousness, a feeling of mutual relationship, that found its most characteristic expression in Lawson’s doctrine of mateship’ (p.348). Here, the characteristics of a distinctive Australian literature are defined in social and political terms, although the vaguer perceptions of the pre-Hancock *Outline* are retained also—‘a kind of warmth and glow which seems to be a reflection of heat and light and the colour-effects of the landscape’ (p.335). After his period of ‘Self-Conscious Nationalism’, Green abandons the attempt to relate social and literary developments closely. His promise to discuss national types and characteristics at the end is not fulfilled; perhaps because, as the introduction to the ‘Modern Period’ suggests, the democratic idealism of those earlier decades had become dissipated in cosmopolitanism and superficiality.

The *History of Australian Literature* most fully achieves the aims Barton had suggested nearly a century before. The mass of information it assembles on the press, the social groupings of writers, and the economics of authorship make it an important contribution to social and cultural history as well as a more narrowly literary study. So comprehensive, in fact, is Green that the broad interpretation he offers on social and literary relationships in the nineties is qualified by his recognition that there were many periodicals other than the *Bulletin*,

writers like Brennan, Baylebridge, and Richardson as well as Lawson, Furphy, and Paterson, and the influences of the Celtic twilight as well as democratic nationalism on a host of minor writers. In these ways, the *History* avoids the stereotyped account of the development of a national literature that had been advanced by wedding Hancock's social analysis to literary history.

Now that the major role for the literary historian was no longer to provide the basic biographical and bibliographical information (as had been necessary in 1930), critical interpretations of the stereotypes appeared. Cecil Hadgraft's *Australian Literature* was published the year before Green's *History*. It concentrates on 'pure' literature and the methodological problems of establishing 'periods' that will reconcile the temper of a particular time with the literary works of distinction produced within it. Thus on his first period, Hadgraft writes: 'The name Colonial Period has been suggested for these seventy years. If poetry alone is considered then the name is pertinent. But to apply it to a period that includes Clarke's masterpiece seems almost defamatory. It is worth noting, however, that the literature of the period does not much express Australian ideals.'¹² For his second period 1880–1930 Hadgraft postulates two 'subperiods', 1880–1914 and 1900–1930, to account for the diversity of writing, some consciously nationalistic, some unconcerned with issues of nationality, and for the stubborn refusal of facts to fit the stereotypes neatly: 'the nineties, often thought of as prolific in valuable and representative works are really rather thin. Only two volumes of Lawson's tales and one of his verse and only one volume of Paterson's verse, for instance, appeared before 1900' (p.169).

A similar awareness that the courses of literary and social history did not always run parallel had already been expressed by G. A. Wilkes, in his essay 'The Eighteen Nineties':

Was there a literary period 'the nineties' in Australia? The stages of Australian literary history have still to be determined. The present tendency is to fix them in accordance with existing political or economic divisions, so that a new age is dated from the gold-rushes of 1851, for instance, another from the nineties or the

12 Cecil Hadgraft, *Australian Literature: A Critical Account to 1995* (Heinemann, London, 1960), p.53.

attainment of Federation in 1901, and another from the Great War of 1914–18. This is to determine periods of literary development by reference to non-literary criteria, and the boundaries that result are often fallacious.¹³

Wilkes sees the literature of the period having been distorted by the emphasis placed on democratic and nationalistic writing, which was not the only kind of writing, was not necessarily the best—and was certainly not the best because it was democratic. He combines a historian's responsibility to take account of all relevant evidence with a critic's attention to the interpretation of texts (for example, what Furphy was concerned with) and their artistic quality (the best of Lawson's work would not include his political verse).

'The Eighteen Nineties' is the first critically conscious discussion of the hybrid nature of literary history by an Australian critic, and the same awareness of conceptual and methodological problems is found in Wilkes's later *Australian Literature: A Conspectus*, (1969). Like Hadgraft's *Australian Literature* this admirably fulfils the literary historian's traditional role of providing a guide for the non-specialist, while establishing an interpretative framework that is critical of received and stereotyped formulations. By implication, the opening sentence which sees the continual interaction of two cultural strands—European and indigenous—as operating throughout the course of Australian literature, dismisses as irrelevant the riddle 'What is *Australian literature*' with which most previous historians had felt compelled to begin. There is no attempt at an explanation of literary developments in social terms, and wariness of such explanations is suggested by the observation on Neilson and McCrae that they remind us how 'literature at any period may escape parochialism through the artist with the vitality and perception to create his own imaginative world'.¹⁴

As well as these comprehensive literary histories there have been other studies which suggest that the earlier nineteenth century was not as discontinuous with the nineties and the twentieth century as earlier accounts had assumed. Historical studies such as George

13 *Arts* 1 (1958), 17–26, reprinted in Grahame Johnston, ed., *Australian Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1962), p.30.

14 G. A. Wilkes, *Australian Literature: A Conspectus* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1969), p.50.

Nadel's *Australia's Colonial Culture* (1957), Michael Roe's *The Quest for Authority in Eastern Australia* (1965), Henry Mayer's *Marx and Engels in Australia* (1964), and the first volume of Manning Clark's *History of Australia* (1962) made it clear that Australia had a more complex and vital culture than the stereotype of generations awaiting the coming of the *Bulletin* allowed. It was, of course, a 'literary' culture in the fullest sense of that word, and most of its literature assumes most interest for us today in relation to that culture and its issues. Judith Wright in her *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), which searches for correspondences between literary attitudes towards Australia and the historical social reality, also questions assumptions of cultural discontinuity. The dual vision she traces as a recurrent theme of poets throughout the nineteenth century and later sees Australia as a land of exile and a utopia simultaneously in each period, rather than each aspect representing a different stage of development.

Other reinterpretations of a deliberately provocative kind have followed. Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* (1970) although not a literary study (despite its title) impinges on literary history because of his attack on Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958), the democratic egalitarianism of the social and literary tradition postulated by critics and historians in the forties and fifties, and his iconoclastic assault on its most 'representative' literary figure, Henry Lawson. After the appearance of the third volume of Manning Clark's *History* (1973), it seemed that any point in McQueen's diatribe against Australian society as capitalist, racist and militaristic which was relevant to Australian culture in the first half of the nineteenth century had found more substantial and responsible expression in Clark's analysis of the conflicts within this period and the ensuing dominance of bourgeois values in Australian society. Coral Lansbury's *Arcady in Australia* (1970) argues that recurrent images of Australia in literature before the 'nationalist' period were formed in fact in England and represented expectations there that the colonial writer here observed. The facts Coral Lansbury adduces have been questioned; her argument is partial, but it has the virtue of suggesting the complexity of social forces that enter into the forming of literary images and conventions. The image of idyllic possibilities of life in the Australian landscape is a persistent one that her study stimulatingly draws attention to—even though the stimulus might be to disagreement and qualification.

Barry Argyle's *The Australian Novel: 1830–1930* (1972) is also partial, reckless in its procedures, and desperate to assert a continuity in Australian literature and society of the violence and cruelty established in the convict era; but like the others it is most interesting in manifesting a concern to revalue the past, to discover continuities with the present, and to depart from received stereotypes (though both of these writers seem equally anxious to establish their own).

The attitudes of historians, literary or otherwise, towards culture in nineteenth century Australia have acquired a history of their own by now. The closing decades of the century especially provide a focal point for any general account of Australian culture, so that, today, we cannot look back directly to the nineteenth century itself without being conscious of the interpretations and evaluations of it that have been offered in the interval between its close and our own vantage point in time. The 'colonial' period probably seems more interesting now than it has in earlier decades this century. Its literature may not be granted any intrinsically higher value than it has been accorded previously, but when the different later perspectives are taken into account, the period raises interesting issues for cultural history. These issues concern the social ramifications of literature and culture generally, and here most later commentators have much in common with nineteenth century critics, who were similarly concerned with relating social and cultural development and with suggesting formative and causal connections. The basic assumptions here, and the forms of the arguments advanced, have not changed essentially over more than a century, and these are valuably rehearsed in Geoffrey Serle's *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (1973), the first book to provide a comprehensive cultural history of Australia.

One of the many virtues of Serle's outline is that, like Desmond Byrne's earlier analysis, it brings into the open assumptions which prefer to shelter shyly behind a hedge of organicist analogies. 'Culture is a highly perishable growth which, transplanted, cannot bloom as before', Serle himself writes, and quotes from Henry James's *Hawthorne* (1879), the now classic statement about the thinness of the soil in which the American novelist found himself planted.¹⁵ The analogy, implicit in

15 Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788–1972* (Heinemann, Melbourne, 1973), p.52.

our uses of the word 'culture', between man's cultivation of the natural world and his 'cultivation' of what he has created himself begs many questions. Talk of 'transplanting', of tending slips or seedlings in the new soil in the expectation of a later harvest, follow naturally—such tropes come as second nature to the literati. But what sort of growth is being presupposed—qualitative or quantitative—and is there any essential relationship between the two? What ensures this growth—are 'natural' processes involved, is time essential? Or is this a pseudo-explanation that disguises only a confidence that what has happened elsewhere will happen here, eventually? What is the 'soil'—the people, all the people, or culturally conscious groups and individuals? James's emphasis on the need for 'an accumulation of history and custom ... a complexity of manners and types, to form a fund of suggestion for a novelist' has been very influential in later discussions of the relationship of the individual talent to a social tradition. It tells us a lot about the position James felt himself to be in, but he was clearly wrong about the writer in mid-nineteenth century America: not only was there Hawthorne, there were Emerson, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, Poe, and others producing one of the most vital periods in any national literature in that century. These writers did not go unobserved in Australia, by Harpur, by Kendall, by many critics. As Frederick Sinnett intimated in 1856, in his essay 'The Fiction Fields of Australia', the Australian writer, deprived of such properties of romance as ivied ruins or even a house with seven gables, could better concentrate on the serious concerns of fiction.

The need for Australia to grow in scale and diversity and to move towards nationhood Serle also lists as important factors in the 'theory of cultural growth' he advances. Again, nineteenth century critics (for example, the historian Turner in 1898) had nominated these as essential for the eventual development of a national literature; but are these 'essential factors', do they contribute to an explanation of how culture 'grows', or do they provide a description of the social conditions against which it grew in America or Australia? If, as did the majority of Australian critics in the nineteenth century, we assume a natural evolution or growth at work, how do we explain the relative lack of 'progress' in the 1920s in Australia? Was the federationist and nationalist idealism which has been seen as the stimulus behind the literature of the preceding decades in advance of actual social conditions, and did this become apparent

in the twenties? Are the arts really active agents in social change or are they, like seeds waiting for the right season, soil, and water, passively dependent on fertile social conditions? Serle himself sees not only 'growth' but 'maturity' as important, and argues that the delayed development in literature and painting in the twenties is related to the delayed development of national independence and to the continuation of cultural isolation. This is a succinct, accurate expression of one's 'sense' of the period but how is 'maturity' (as distinguished from 'growth', which is thereby assigned a more quantitative or descriptive role) determined: is *For the Term of His Natural Life*, by all accounts the finest novel of the 'colonial' period, necessarily a lesser achievement than the novels (all of them, or the best of them) that were produced at a more 'mature' stage of our cultural development?

A general pattern of links connecting literature and society in a causal way remains as elusive as ever. At one level there are the abstractions of 'society', 'culture', and 'literature', at another level the particular works of individual writers (in dealing with these critics and biographers can also contribute to our historical understanding, by bringing these abstractions to life in the case of their chosen subjects). Too much insistence on social and economic conditions, publishing outlets and markets, political ideology and established conventions can lead to a deterministic sense that the 'age' has produced the literature; at the other extreme too great an insistence on the autonomy of imaginative literature can ignore the involvement, direct or indirect, of writers with their society.

In confronting this dilemma and attempting to find a point of balance, Australian literary historians have thrown, in Barton's words, 'some light, from a new point of view, on our social history'. They have contributed to our awareness of the culture of the past and raised issues of its interpretation from a later vantage point in time and its relevance to the present. These are not issues that can be disposed of finally, because they reconstitute themselves for each generation. Beyond recording biographical and bibliographical facts, what literary historians do most successfully is register their generation's understanding of the past. In this way literary historians themselves have some claim on posterity: for later generations the best of them will become part of what they have described, part of literary history.